

CONCEPT OF DISEASE AND FOLK THERAPY IN A VILLAGE OF ANDHRA PRADESH*

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Introduction :

Every society has got a body of beliefs, norms and concepts with regard to the nature of disease and its treatment. These are closely integrated with the cultural matrix or social organization of the society. According to their own concepts of cause and prevention, the people practise some form of preventive medicine. The character and dynamism of any form of preventive and curative medicine depends on its place in the cultural realm of society. This basic factor shows why many rural communities have got more concern and emphasis about their folk etiology and folk therapy.

In the present study an attempt is made to understand the medical phenomenon in a rural context in order to evaluate the place of folk etiology and therapy against modern scientific medicine.

A village-Perur in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh was selected for the present study. Most of the villagers are agriculturists, with maximum level of illiteracy and with minimum medical facilities. The data were collected on various aspects with regard to the "health culture" of the community. Various groups of persons are interviewed purposively, in order to obtain the beliefs, norms and concepts about disease and the nature and process of treatment.

Concept of Disease :

The people of Perur have a chart of ideal concepts of folk kind about health and disease. A majority of these concepts are closely knitted to the sphere of religion of the community.

Illness is regarded distinctly as an unpleasant state which deprives a person from the proper functioning as an individual. Theories of disease generally have a major relevance to the moral order i.e. to the control of a person's behaviour in the society. However, the etiology of disease is explained both in naturalistic and supernaturalistic terms. Many diseases are frequently attributed to several causes of natural and supernatural origins. But in special circumstances, only a definite single cause, generally of supernatural origin, is attributed to certain diseases.

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People generally hold that diseases caused due to supernatural agents are complicated in nature and the cure is more difficult than of those caused due to physical forces. The supernatural causation of disease can be explained by five types of basic categories of events or situations: 1) breach of taboo (2) black magic (3) evil eye and evil mouth (4) wrath of goddesses (5) intrusion of disease causing agent.

BREACH OF TABOO : Diseases like continuous fever, loose motions, vomiting conditions affecting tonsils, paralysis and diabetes are believed due to breach of taboo. Particular type of activity or attempt is said to be a taboo, because certain supernatural agents or invisible powers will have command over them and the breach of which makes the agent cast evil effect upon the victim. Some times the 'Omnipotent' also punishes the persons for molestation and disruptive tendencies and deeds which are socially called sins. Breach of taboo is a widely accepted belief that causes diseases.

BLACK MAGIC : The local name for black magic is *chethabadi*. The people recognise the cause after observing the symptoms of the disease and it is confirmed by performing a ceremony called *rangamu* (divination). Basing on the nature of the procedure, magic can be grouped into contagious and sympathetic magic. The curative aspect of the disease lies in the timely performance of counter magic.

EVIL EYE AND EVIL MOUTH : A widely held belief throughout the village is the effect of evil eye and evil mouth as a factor in the causation of disease. Many minor diseases or ailments are considered as the effects of evil eye and evil mouth. Childrens are believed to be most susceptible to the effects of evil eye and evil mouth.

WRATH OF GODDESSES : Cholera, small pox, chicken pox and some other related diseases are said to be caused due to the wrath of the goddesses who are named as Gangamma, Sunkamma, Atamma, Nukamma, Poleramma and Arkamma. Each goddess is said to cause a disease which is named after her. The villagers firmly believe that their home borne goddess Sugamma protects them from the epidemic diseases and other calamities. It is surprising to learn that there were no cholera or small pox patients in the sample. They did not believe the causation of their diseases under this concept. They account unhygienic condition of the body and the surroundings as responsible for the causation of cholera and small pox.

INTRUSION OF DISEASE CAUSING AGENT : Certain spirits or ghosts are said to cause disease or psychic aberrations. This concept is not popularly recognised.

The attribution of the above factors is dependent upon the favourable conditions and symptoms of the disease or in the due course of the sick period. Many diseases are attributed either to the effect of breach of taboo or of an evil eye. Diseases due to empirical causes are often suspected to have the involvement of these two factors. The disease causing supernatural categories are having a distinct place in the community. They are thoroughly studied and necessary treatment is sought.

The other part of the folk etiology consists of attribution of physical or natural or empirical causes upon the occurrence of disease. Many people recognise several empirical causes and their corresponding diseases. Some of the popularly recognised causes of diseases or sickness are : excessive cold or hot condition of the body, unsuitability of weather and water, presence of excess bile, ingestion of incompatible foods, and non-digestible food stuffs or dislocation of certain internal organs of the body, alcoholism, heat stroke, being wet for longer periods and sleep after oil bath. The attribution of any empirical cause is assisted to the patient's activity of the recent past. This is further confirmed by observing the nature or symptoms of the ailment or diseases. Generally these diseases are not dealt with, unless the disease is found to be severe.

Diseases due to empirical causes can be cured by any person who has the requisite knowledge. Both magical and herbal treatment is sought in curing these diseases. Besides certain religious formalities are also observed in order to strengthen the treatment and for quick relief.

Folk Therapy :

Indigenous treatment consists of oral administration of herbal mixtures, decoctions, application of oils, massaging the body, regulation of diet, magical cures, religious ceremonies and offering sacred promises as a part of the total treatment. Almost all people of all ethnic groups get treated upon the occurrence of disease by the indigenous medicines. It is also observed that the wealthy people go for allopathic medicine, but they are not reluctant in accepting the indigenous treatment. Sometimes, practising indigenous treatment depends upon the accessibility of the herbal mixtures or the expert.

There are two specialists of indigenous medicine in the village. They know number of medicinal herbs or 'materia medica' and have epistemological knowledge about various diseases and sickness. The quacks are also experts in black magic, counter magic, exorcism and conjuration. The people believe that these quacks have power in curing the diseases what is locally called '*hasthavasi*'. This power is also attributed to some other persons in the village whose treatment provides easy cure for the ailments.

Folk therapy, as practised in the village can be broadly divided into magical treatment and empirical treatment.

Diseases due to empirical causes are tackled by empirical treatment which mainly consist of administration of herbal mixtures, oils, cauterization, massaging the body and regulation of diet. In many cases it is assisted by some form of magical treatment. Atleast wearing the sacred vermilion dot obtained from the local temple, invariably accompanies the empirical treatment. Sometimes certain afflictions are treated with magical spells or charms or through certain religious offerings to deities or gods, even though the ailments are due to the natural forces. For example, scorpion bite or snake bite are often treated by the exorcist who spells certain magical chants.

The empirical treatment has got a special place in the community. Various types of empirical treatment are firmly believed to be the effective measures in tackling the disease or ailment. For example, jaundice can be cured by cauterization of the wrist of the patient and eating the 'pus producing' food stuffs. This treatment is considered to be the most effective.

Magical treatment consists of exorcism, divination, conjuration, religious ceremonies, sacred offerings and some other magical cures. The central idea in any type of magical treatment lies in either appearing the spirit or in nullifying the effect caused by the supernatural agents. Besides magical treatment, empirical treatment is also sought but the former always precedes the latter in case of treatment of disease due to supernatural forces.

People feel security and satisfaction only after performing the magical or religious rites. Patient and the family members along with the exorcist participate in the magical treatment that will enhance in the patient attaining psychological stability and strength. Moreover, the treatment will be in the rural context which will be best suited to the psychology of the people. The patient will have some knowledge about the implications and method of treatment involved in the disease.

The diseases caused due to the wrath of goddess are tackled by propitiating the goddess Sugamma. Cholera and small-pox are said to be never spotted in the village. However the other such related diseases do infect the people and cattle. During such conditions they propitiate Sugamma, who will come to the rescue of the people. The villagers were the least bothered in securing the medical aid (from the government). People are least interested in getting vaccination but many are found to be vaccinated. People say that they are forced to accept vaccination.

Disease due to black magic is treated by performing counter magic in order to nullify its effect. It is followed by intaking of herbal medicines, wearing amulets, avoidance of eating certain food stuffs and restriction of social movement for a month. The people firmly believe that neither herbal medicine nor allopathic treatment can cure such diseases.

The effects of evil eye and evil mouth are cured by chanting some spells and waving certain objects around the face of the patient. The basic idea involved in this act is to transmigrate the evil affect present in the body of the patient into the objects waved, by the power of spells. These are destroyed either by burning or by spitting at the objects.

In case of diseases due to breach of taboo, the therapy involves confession of sin or fault committed by the patient, performing religious or magical deeds in order to expel the effect and fulfilling the neglected promises offered sometime ago to the deity, sacrificing a fowl or goat and offering sacred cooking.

Conjuration, wearing amulets, appeasing the spirits, vacating the house or white washing the house on which the spirit or disease causing object has cast its evil effect,

sacrificing goat or fowl, incantation, repeated pattings with the neem leaves on the head for several times are some of the methods of treatment in curing the disease due to intrusion of disease causing agent.

The magical treatment as practised in the village, provides some meaning which appears as an appropriate method of curing a particular disease.

Place of Modern Medicine in the Village :

The scientific notions of disease have practically no place in the etiology of disease. The scientific notion that a very few villagers could give was the unhygienic conditions of the body and the surroundings. The germ theory of disease is not known to them and there is 'practically no recognition that some diseases are water-borne. Even though many villagers are favouring indigenous treatment, they are not completely reluctant in accepting allopathic medicine.

From the above account it is evident that using modern medicine does not mean that the villagers have faith in it and a major part of the people prefer folk medicine.

Conclusions :

Health is not always rigidly restricted concept revolving around the well being of the individual body. The people frequently consider bodily or mental afflictions as an indication of moral transgression in thought or in deed against the norms of the society. This is the main and ultimate core in their folk etiology. Empirical or supernatural factors are only of ancillary function and they are known in order to tackle or cure the disease. As such most of the diseases are frequently seen as a warning sign or vitiation from punishing agent of a broken taboo or unpleasant behaviour or an apparent urge to depart from the approved way of life. This sort of concept and viewing seems to be functionally important in maintaining group cohesion and restraining the disruptive tendency which may develop among the villagers. It is common for the woman folk of the village to abuse the persons for their offensive and disruptive tendencies and deeds in terms of diseases.

The folk etiology of this case is mainly explained by empirical and supernatural factors. The empirical factors as recognised in the village are neither fully rational nor irrational. Some of the forces are scientifically approved facts. Sometimes, supernatural factors also appear as the genuine disease causing factors. The villagers have got concrete proofs in asserting the supernatural causation of disease. Almost the entire knowledge of folk etiology has its roots from the cultural matrix of the community. The concept "medicine is a social institution or activity", as explained by many scientists elsewhere is also found true in this village also. It is a communal affair in maintaining the institution of health —its concepts, norms, beliefs and practices. The concept of etiology and folk therapy has a major involvement in the daily life of the people and as such they provide meaning about themselves which are easily perceived and accepted by the villagers.

Some of the reasons for success of folk medicine are summarised below :

Religion plays a major role in the people's concern about their folk etiology. The people believe that their home born goddess Sugamma protects the village in all respects. This is ascertained by the fact of non-occurrence of either small pox or cholera in the village. The second reason is that the folk therapy is found to be effective in many cases. The people are proud about having effective means in tackling certain diseases. The third reason lies in the fact that disease occurrence is found to be less. Many people say that they rarely suffer from sickness as their bodies are strong enough to ward off maladies. Moreover, many ailments are said to be cured automatically, sometimes, with simple folk treatment if the patient feels it necessary. The fourth reason is that the folk way of treatment is more agreeable to the villagers as it is the functional and integral part of their folk culture. Moreover, the native concept of multi-causal explanation of disease is also a factor that encourages the folk therapy. The nature of folk etiology and treatment provides meaning and function to the villagers and they are culturally the suitable ways of tackling the diseases.

Certain views held by the people about modern medicine and doctor also promote them to favour indigenous treatment. The people expect something too much, specially in case of diagnosis, treatment and cure from the modern medicine and doctor. The way of diagnosis and treatment is not adopted to the fundamentals of village social organization. Many people reported inconvenience, both psychological and cultural, either in hospital or in the presence of doctor.

Lastly, certain other factors like, low literary level, low income and occupational patterns are found to be responsible for the success of folk medicine.

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SUMMARY

In a village in Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh a few research scholars of social anthropology made enquiries with the people of that place about the cause of diseases and their treatment. The people told that the diseases were caused due to supernatural forces and their cure also was difficult in comparison with the cure for the disease, produced by physical factors. Diseases due to supernatural causes are treated by magical methods and religious ceremonies etc. while those caused by empiric, and physical forces are treated by herbal mixtures, oil massages, and cauterisation etc.

आन्ध्र प्रदेश के एक गांव में रोगों व उनकी चिकित्सा के प्रति प्रचलित धारणा

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आन्ध्र प्रदेश के चित्तूर जिले के एक गांव में मनुष्यशरीर रचना शास्त्र के कुछ शोधकर्त्ताओं ने वहां के लोगों से रोग के कारणों और उनकी चिकित्सा के बारे में पूछताछ किया। उन्होंने बताया कि रोग अलौकिक शक्तियों के कारण होते हैं जिनका इलाज भौतिक कारणों से उत्पन्न रोगों की अपेक्षा कठिन होता है। इनकी चिकित्सा भी उसी प्रकार की जाती है। अलौकिक शक्ति जनित रोग मन्त्र जादू टोने इत्यादि से ठीक होते हैं और प्रयोगसिद्ध अथवा भौतिक कारणों से उत्पन्न रोगों में जड़ी बूटियों, तेल मालिश, दागने की क्रियाओं आदि का प्रयोग होता है।